

Content Advisory

COLL01928 – Steady as She Goes: Songs and Chanties from the Days of Commercial Sail

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STEADY AS SHE GOES



Songs and Chanties from the days of Commercial Sail
Louis Killen • Jeff Warner • Gerret Warner • Fud Benson

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SONGS AND CHANTIES FROM THE DAYS OF COMMERCIAL SAIL

On July 4, 1976, the tall ships came to New York Harbor from many nations to help celebrate America's 200th birthday. The entire country was thrilled as the TV cameras captured the spectacle. Such grace! Such beauty! Ah, to have been a sailor in the early days on one of those glorious vessels, climbing the tall masts, unfurling the billowing sails to catch the ocean breeze.

Well, it never came through on television, but the plain fact was that a sailor's life in the days of commercial sail was pure Hell. He had no union to speak up for him. There were no regulations or laws to protect him. And the captain's power and control over his men was as absolute as any plantation owner over his slaves.

Richard Henry Dana, Jr. worked on one of those sailing ships in the 1830's and in his classic *Two Years Before the Mast* describes the brutal flogging administered by his captain, Frank Thompson, to a poor sailor who had the audacity to ask a question about one of the captain's actions:

When he was made fast, he turned to the captain and asked him what he was to be flogged for. "Have I ever refused my duty, sir? Have you ever known me to hang back or not to know my work?"

"No," said the captain, "it is not *that* that I flog you for; I flog you for your interference, for asking questions."

"Can't a man ask a question here without being flogged?"

"No," shouted the captain; "nobody shall open his mouth aboard this vessel but myself," and began laying the blows upon his back. As he went on, his passion increased, and he danced about the deck, calling out, as he swung the rope: "If you want to know what I flog you for, I'll tell you. It's because I like to do it!—It suits me! That's what I do it for!"

The man writhed under the pain until he could endure it no longer, when he called, out, "O Jesus Christ! O Jesus Christ!"

"Don't call on Jesus Christ," shouted the captain, "*he can't help you. Call on me, Frank Thompson!* He's the man! He can help you! Jesus Christ can't help you now!"

At these words, which I never shall forget, my blood ran cold. At length the falling of the blows and the cries of the man ceased, and at a signal from the captain the mate turned him loose.

The captain, swelling with rage, and with the importance of his achievement, walked the quarter-deck, calling out to us:

"You see your condition! You see where I've got you all! I'll make you toe the mark, every soul of you! Yes, a slave driver,—a nigger-driver! I'll see who'll tell me he isn't a NIGGER SLAVE!"

If a thought of resistance crossed the minds of any of the men, what was to be done? What is there for sailors to do? If they resist, it is mutiny; and if they succeed, and take the vessel, it is piracy. If they ever yield again, their punishment must come; and if they do not yield, what are they to be for the rest of their lives? Bad as it was, they saw it must be borne.

Music helped make the harsh life of the sailor bearable. Chanties sung to the rhythm of the work—whether it was bringing up the anchor or hauling in the sails—made the backbreaking work go better. "A song is as good as ten men," said the sailors of those days. In the forecabin or in the bars on shore ballads and songs about life on the seas and misadventures in port lifted worn spirits or sometimes rekindled old dreams about leaving the lonely life of the sea for a farm and a family on land. But for most sailors it was "off to sea once more" cussing the elements and the officers and trying to survive one day at a time.

THE PERFORMERS

LOUIS KILLEN was brought up in a singing family in the industrial and mining region of the river Tyne in Northeastern England. He arrived in the United States in 1966 with a bag full of hundreds of marvelous traditional British songs of sailors and fishermen, miners and milkmaids, farmers and weavers. Britain's loss has been America's gain. His subtle, full bodied interpretations, sometimes mournful, sometimes hilarious, have delighted audiences from coast to coast. He has recorded for Topic and Front Hall records.



JEFF WARNER has been singing, song-leading, teaching and producing folk music concerts for more than a decade. He is presently Director of Productions for the Guitar Workshop in New York, administering grants designed to promote traditional American folk music. He is the traditional singer at Old Bethpage Village Restoration, has appeared at the Newport, Philadelphia, and Smithsonian Folk Festivals, and has recorded for National Geographic Records.



GERRET WARNER teaches film and English at Dover-Sherborn High School in Massachusetts. He has been singing traditional songs for more than a decade—many of them learned from his own family's collection of ballads and lore gathered from rural folk along the Eastern Seaboard. He has appeared at the Newport, Philadelphia, and Smithsonian Folk Festivals, and was co-director of the 1973 concert tour of the Hudson River Sloop CLEARWATER.



JOHN (FUD) BENSON was born in Newport, Rhode Island and grew up sailing the waters of Narragansett Bay. Coming from a musical family, his dual interests in sail and song find a rich field of expression in the traditional music of the sea. John (Fud) Benson is an artist in stone and other materials. He is the man who designed the front cover of this album.



COLLECTOR RECORDS 1928 STEREOPHONIC

SIDE ONE

1. PADDY LAY BACK: A capstan shanty (used for hauling up the anchor) describing the feelings of a sailor towards his shipmates when landing on a new ship. There are, as well, some terse words concerning the Captain, the Mate, and the agent who got him the job. (BENSON)

2. BOLD RILEY: A halyard (literally haul on the yardarm) shanty. According to A.L. Lloyd, it got its start in ships carrying sugar and rum from the West Indies to Bristol and Liverpool. "White stocking day" refers to the days when wives would put on their most attractive attire to make their trips to the shipping office for their allotment pay. (JEFF WARNER)

3. ROLLING DOWN TO OLD MAUI: Stan Hugill of Liverpool says that as early as 1820 Maui, one of the Hawaiian Islands (then the Sandwich Islands), was considered "home" by the Yankee sailors who hunted the northern grounds of the Behring Straits for right and bowhead whales. This is an off-watch song, as distinct from a working song, of whalersmen longing for the women and weather of better latitudes. (JEFF WARNER)

4. JOLLY ROVING TAR: Frank and Anne Warner collected this song from Mrs. Lena Bourne Fish of East Jaffrey, N.H. in 1941. The vitality of the melody doesn't hide the feelings of Jack Tar towards the shoreman who loved the sailor when he had money and despised him when he didn't. (GERRET WARNER)

5. TOPMAN AND THE AFTERGUARD: Conditions in the navies of the world were always bad in the days of sail. Here is the story of the British Royal Navy as told by the afterguard or Marine who worked in the topmast and by the topman or sailor who worked in the ship. (KILLEN)

6. OFF TO SEA ONCE MORE: The most realistic of all songs about the conditions of seafarers under sail. This is what life was like both ashore and at sea. (KILLEN)

SIDE TWO

1. STRIKE THE BELL: Four hours on watch and four hours off, day and night, was a hard life aboard ship. Eight bells marked the end of the watch, as well as the time, and answered the plea of the sailor for a few moments rest in his bunk, even if the call would soon be "all hands on deck" to weather the storm. The "glass" referred to in the chorus is the barometer. (JEFF WARNER)

2. SHIP IN DISTRESS: One of a number of traditional songs dealing with the terror of a sailor adrift in an unsailable vessel. (KILLEN)

3. BLOW THE MAN DOWN: A halyard shanty with a story line favored by all sailors who had to spend much time away from the ladies. (BENSON)

4. THE COAST OF PERU: A nearly step-by-step account of the hunting and killing of a whale. The song was collected by Gale Huntington of Martha's Vineyard, and is thought to date back to the last quarter of the 18th century. (GERRET WARNER)

5. ALL FOR ME GROG: Another off-watch song describing *both* of the major pleasures of Jack Tar ashore. (ALL)

6. SHALLOW BROWN: Another halyard shanty from the West Indies, this one collected by English folklorist Cecil Sharp in the early part of the twentieth century. Some versions of this song indicate that Shallow Brown might have been a slave who was sold to a Yankee shipowner. Free man or slave, he is jumping ship "... to cross them Chili mountains" and seek a better life. (GERRET WARNER)

7. BRING 'EM DOWN: One of the shanties used for "bracing" the ship when short, sharp pulls of the line were needed. Bracing turned the yards when the ship was being tacked or changing course. (KILLEN)

8. AWAY RIO: A capstan shanty used to ease the work of "heaving a pawl" and raising the anchor. A favorite song of the day, it would have been known by old hands and green recruits alike, and was most often used as the first song of a voyage when outward bound from home port. (JEFF WARNER)
(Names in parentheses are the singers who are featured for that particular song.)

The work songs of the sailing ships were "chanties" or shanties—both spellings are used, but the pronunciation is always with the soft "sh". That's why some experts believe the origin is French from "chanter", but no one knows for certain.

STEADY AS SHE GOES is one of a series of **COLLECTOR** albums in the area of industrial folklore and folksong. Previous discs include songs of textile workers, coal miners, railroaders, and Wobblies. Write for free brochure.

Cover design by John (Fud) Benson

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